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Colonial Knowledge and Indigenous Power in the Dutch East Indies

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Notes

> Do you know the villages and quarters of the Javanese? Most likely you've only passed by them. Do you know what the Javanese farmer, of your own people, eats?... Believe me, Tuan, I know these people better than you do. You'll understand later, there is too much that you do not know about your own people.[1]

In this passage from Pramoedya Ananta Toer's Child of All Nations, Minke, a budding Indonesian nationalist, is reprimanded by a Dutch journalist for his lack of understanding of his own people, the Javanese. Minke, from an elite aristocratic family, is one of the first Javanese to complete a Dutch high-school education and is enamored with everything European. The accusation of not knowing his own people is stinging, particularly coming from a Dutch gentleman who claims to have a superior knowledge of them. The fact that he cannot refute the accusation makes it all the more troubling for him.

The colonizer's knowledge of the colonized has always been privileged in colonial discourse. Indeed, Minke himself cannot imagine an East-Indies totally independent of the Dutch. His concern in this matter is similar to that of the Dutch: the Javanese rulers and Javanese society in

general remain backward and feudal. What he does not yet grasp is that under the Dutch, the traditions of the Javanese, particularly of the elite, were first defined, then frozen. The very act of defining Javanese tradition, furthermore, was just as much an act of self-definition on the part of the Dutch as it was an attempt to accurately understand Javanese society. Through the Dutch discourse of self-definition, the Javanese came to be defined as everything the Dutch were not: a phenomenon common to colonial discourse worldwide. They were forced into molds that the Dutch created, then told that they were not capable of ruling themselves because of the backwardness of their society.

In this paper, I will first examine the prevalent image of the Javanese elite in the final decades of Dutch rule. Then I will demonstrate the role played by the Dutch in creating this image. Up to this point, the discussion clearly hinges on Foucauldian notions of power and knowledge. Yet for all the insight Foucault may offer to such a study, he presents a static image of power that is somewhat divorced from the processes through which hegemony is created and subsequently renegotiated in an ongoing discourse. I hope to show that the Javanese themselves played a significant role in the emergence and continual renegotiation of the hegemonic discourse of the Dutch.

To understand Minke's skepticism toward the possibility of Dutch rule, it is useful to understand his view of the Javanese elites. In the following passage, Minke has been summoned by a regent and describes the thickly feudal elements that continue to define the nobility:

> The agent was already inviting me--the impudence!--to take off my shoes and socks. The beginning of a great tyranny. Some supernatural power forced me to follow his orders. The floor felt cold under my bare soles. He signaled me and I went, step by step, to the top. He pointed out to me the place where I must sit, eyes to the floor, before a rocking chair.... Oh rocking chair, you will be a witness to how I humiliate myself in order to glorify some bupati I don't even know. Damn! What would my friends say if they saw me traveling on my knees like this....

When the regent finally comes in:

> I raised my hands, clasped in obeisance.... And I did not now withdraw my pose until the bupati had sat himself comfortably in his place.... This person, the bupati of B--, cleared his throat. Then slowly he sat down on the rocking chair, kicking off his slippers behind the foot bench, and placed his honorable feet on the velvet cushion The chair began to rock a little. Damn! How slowly time passed. Some object, by my reckoning fairly long, gently tapped upon my uncovered head. How insolent was this being that I must honor. And every tap I must greet with a sigh of grateful obeisance....
> "You!" he addressed me weakly, hoarsely. "Yes, I, my master, Honored Lord Bupati," said my mouth, and like a machine my hands were raised in obeisance for the umpteenth time and my heart cursed for I don't know how many times now.[2]

The elaborate rules for this deference and sycophancy, known as hormat, were an inevitable component of court life in the final decades of Dutch rule, however much those carrying it out may have resented it. It is fitting that the resentment in this case comes from a member of an aristocratic, or priyayi, family (indeed, the regent whom he cannot see in his obsequious position is his own father) who has had the benefit of a Dutch education. In this way, Minke is representative of the first nationalist elites who were later to take up the question of hormat as a major concern.

Power and Status in Precolonial Java

It would, of course, be useless to try to argue that precolonial Java was democratic and egalitarian. Already in the Central Javanese period-roughly the early eighth century through 938 C.E.-systems of hierarchy were developing on both the village and state levels of society and government.[3] By the Eastern Javanese period, lasting through the fifteenth century, an increasingly complex bureaucracy developed alongside further social stratification. Intermediaries between the king and his subjects grew in number concomitant with increasing levels within the bureaucratic hierarchy. At the same time, the king and much of the upper nobility were requiring a greater degree of deference to be paid to them. For example, the king was no longer addressed directly by his subjects. One had rather, to address his shoes. By the twelfth century, it was to the dust under his shoes that one spoke.[4]

It hardly needs to be said, however, that noting the "feudal" nature of precolonial Javanese kingship misses the point.[5] Javanese notions of kingship were never static as Western discourse so frequently asserted. Even on the eve of Dutch colonialism, the relatively new kingdom of Mataram was undergoing significant changes in its ruling philosophy. Although much continuity from earlier kingdoms was extant in Mataram, concepts of hierarchy and duty were becoming further developed as well as the notion of an aristocratic class known as the priyayi.

The contract between the king and his subjects is outlined in a fairly abstract way by the kawula-gusti (servant-lord) relationship. Theologically, the goal is for the servant to achieve union with God-an adaptation of the Indian concept of moksha. On a more practical level it is a concept that outlines the relationship of the king with his subjects and, more generally, between superiors and inferiors.[6] The ideal kawula-gusti relationship is one of mutual respect and concern accompanied by a contract in which the lord protects and the servant pledges his total devotion.[7] In the Dewa Ruci Lakon, a Javanese shadow puppet play, Bima submits to his teacher's commands despite their obvious intention of bringing about his death. This story provides an ideal example of the degree of loyalty expected in such a relationship.

In order to fulfill his end of the contract, the king required a force of bureaucrats to carry out administrative matters. The pangreh praja (rulers of the state) were in this sense precursors of the modern pegawai negri (civil servants). Their primary function was to maintain peace and order within the state.

Actual administrative matters were carried out by the abdi dalem, the servants of the king, known also as punggawa (officials). These positions initially were the exclusive preserve of the aristocracy. During the later Mataram period, however, the ranks of the ruling elite opened to those of common descent.[8] The elite priyayi class, which was traditionally comprised of only punggawa, opened up its ranks to include the family and descendants of punggawa.[9] In order to join the elite, one with no royal blood whatsoever had to spend much time in the service of the king, cultivating personal ties and seeking the king's favor.

Although one could not seriously state that these changes spelled out a society free of hierarchy and oppression, changes were nevertheless occurring. Likewise one need not resort to the impossible and tired "what if" questions, nor set up a tally sheet enumerating the pluses and minuses of Dutch rule. The point is that the Dutch, in a panoptic gesture, cast their gaze on what they saw as a static feudal society. Their next step was to define what they saw, fixing a distorted and essentialized picture of the Javanese.

Recently, John Pemberton has argued quite compellingly that much of what is considered to be "traditional Java" is, in fact, a construct that emerged during the colonial era.[10] This figure of Java was fashioned within the newly formed discursive milieu of rule. Pemberton goes beyond the more obvious effects of colonial intrusion, demonstrating that not only did the Dutch presence refashion the figure of "Java" from without, but also, as a result of this new discourse, fundamentally altered from within the articulation of Javanese identity. New ideas of identity emerged, on the one hand adaptations from the Dutch, but more significantly as a deliberate contrast vis a vis the Dutch. Clearly hybrid identities were emerging, identities which were more than simply the sum of those from which they were formed.

Foucault has shown how, from around the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, power in Europe came to be produced through ever more efficient and insidious methods.[11] Regimes of discipline and normalization increasingly proliferated through society, necessarily marking off the normal from the perverse. Similarly, Stallybrass and White have persuasively suggested that in Victorian Europe a discourse emerged regarding the "low" elements of society.[12] Although this discourse was ostensibly an effort to understand the "low," they argue that it was actually little more than an attempt on the part of the bourgeoisie to define themselves. Furthermore, in an overtly Freudian gesture, Stallybrass and White argue that the bourgeois classes suppressed their nefarious impulses and projected them on to the "low." The European subaltern was defined, therefore, in purely negative terms as what the bourgeoisie was not.

I want to posit that a similar, though certainly not identical, process was occurring in the Dutch East Indies. Indeed, as Stoler has argued regarding Foucault's History of Sexuality, the colonial experience, to which Foucault paid scant attention, was an integral part of this process of the European "high" discourse of self-definition.[13] To this end, I want to focus on the stubborn maintenance of the status of the bupati, or regent, by the Dutch in the face of nationalist disdain for the institution. First, it is useful to adumbrate the historical fashioning of the bupati by the Dutch without, however, ignoring the role of the nobility in the process.

The Colonial Refashioning of the Bupati

The Dutch made it their policy in Java to proceed with as little interference in local politics as possible. The status of the bupati was deliberately maintained in order that they could become the central administrative tool through which the Dutch extracted profits. They reasoned that the volkshoofd (traditional chief) would be able to maintain authority far more effectively than could be expected through any structural changes to the system. In the words of Sutherland:

> [The Dutch] insisted only that the Bupati acknowledge its suzerainty, abstain from political or trade relations with foreign powers, keep the peace, and collect and deliver the required produce. The pomp and ceremony of the native chiefs was retained, and they continued to live according to their own traditions.[14]

The bottom line for the Dutch East India Company was, indeed, the bottom line. Interference was avoided wherever possible.

When the activities of the company were taken over by the Dutch government in 1800, the general policy toward the regents was maintained. A committee looking into "Indian Commerce and Administration" found that export crops could best be grown under the influence of the regent. In maintaining their authority, the regents would remain loyal to the Dutch government while the populace would remain loyal to the regent; the Dutch, consequently, would avoid the need to set up its own elaborate administration.[15]

Eight years later, however, the authority of the regents was sharply curtailed under the reforms of Daendels, and Raffles after him. Daendels essentially reduced the regent to a subordinate, salaried official of the Dutch government. He brought about increased centralization, cut the revenue of the regents, and made it illegal for them to acquire extra income through taxes or "gifts." He placed heavy demands on the regents who, in turn, passed them onto the populace.[16]

The British interregnum in Java from 1811 to 1816 saw further reductions in the importance of the regent. Raffles, as governor-general of Java during that period, implemented reforms to reduce the distance between the state and society. Under his direction, an assistant resident and other lower-ranking officials would work directly with the populace, a move that flew in the face of the indirect methods of the Dutch.[17] As with the reforms of Daendels, the changes advocated by Raffles were never fully realized because of the brevity of his tenure. Nevertheless, between Daendels and Raffles, the reforms that were carried out did significantly affect the position of Dutch officials in Java.

When the Dutch returned, the position of the regent reverted back to near pre-Daendels importance. The Java War from 1825-30 dealt a devastating blow to the Netherlands and caused the Dutch to re-evaluate the regent's position.[18] Under the "Cultivation System," introduced in 1830 and made compulsory in 1834, the position of the regent as the direct head of all Javanese officials was restored.[19]

The Cultivation System was the brainchild of Van den Bosch who strongly advocated a return to the kind of regent who commanded respect from both Javanese and European administrators. They were accorded all the trappings of royalty they had previously enjoyed, including the right to demand services from villages and the restoration of their hereditary rights. The regents were then expected to ensure that the villages would participate in government cultivation projects. In the words of Van Neil, the regents were persuaded to cooperate "by applying both the stick and the carrot: prestige, profit, power, and physical persuasion were present in various degrees."[20]

Under this system, excesses on the part of the regents went unchecked. The burden of the system was passed on to the populace while the regents benefited from the unreasonable demands they often placed upon their subjects. The European administration in Java turned a blind eye to the regents' abuses of power as the regents' status climbed higher perhaps than ever before.[21] Two discourses regarding the role of the indigenous rulers were coming into conflict. The Dutch administrators felt they were preserving the traditional domain of indigenous rule while at the same time extracting profits through the maintenance of the system. From the Javanese side, however, the indigenous philosophies of power relations were put in jeopardy. The regent was in a position where he no longer could fulfill his end of the kawula-gusti relationship discussed above. Indeed, with the outside power of the Dutch backing him up, he no longer had to.

Soon, however, the regents once again found their power being dismantled as the Cultivation System was replaced by a putatively more ethical Agrarian Law. While their rights to services rendered by their subjects and to the land were being abolished, detailed descriptions of their job requirements were being formulated. At the same time, the regents were being forced to make increasingly unrealistic demands on their subjects.[22] The prestige of the priyayi was in a tailspin from which it would never wholly recover.[23]

A number of other events that would affect the priyayi were occurring during the second half of the nineteenth century. One of these was the increasing availability of European education to priyayi families. The Dutch were in a dilemma. On one hand, they were requiring higher levels of education in the administration: on the other, many were worried about the possible social consequences of too much native education. To protect the nobility of the regents, the Dutch separated them from all practical matters and essentially reduced their role to a symbolic one through which Dutch interests were promoted.[24] Practical matters were handled by the district chiefs (wedana), ministers (patih), and the regent's assistant.[25]

The nobility was rapidly losing whatever popularity it once commanded among the Javanese. Its members were increasingly being seen as puppets of the Dutch government, particularly by an emerging Western-educated class, many of whom, ironically, were of priyayi families.[26] A nationalist movement took root in Java at the dawn of the twentieth century, and the priyayi found themselves rapidly becoming a prime target for indigenous criticism toward the colonial government.

Although the role of the bupati did undergo significant transformations, this synopsis clearly points to a deliberate manipulation of its role at the hands of the colonizer. The Dutch, in as much as their rhetoric emphasized indigenous rule, were in the position of privilege that allowed them to define and redefine what that role should be. Throughout these changes, the Dutch maintained that they were simply trying to preserve the indigenous system of rule, and by the early twentieth century had, in effect, created a class of rulers who had become more extractive in their relationship toward their subjects, and at the same time demanded ever more deferential treatment from them. At this point I want to look at how the Javanese elite reacted to the changes imposed on them, emphasizing their contributions to the refashioning of "tradition."

Indigenous Responses

The Dutch intrusion on the indigenous methods of rule meant a sudden loss of absolute power for the bupati. Although the Dutch were keen to maintain the status of the bupati vis a vis their subjects, they forced them into the position of becoming a large cog in the colonial machine: in a sense turning them into tools of Dutch administration. Because the Dutch needed to maintain the legitimacy of the bupati in the eyes of their subjects, the trappings of royalty-the pomp and the ceremony-were retained. Indeed, the very absence of real political power caused the Javanese to turn increasingly to these outward displays of aristocracy.[27] A "Victorianization" of sorts occurred as the elite "further elaborate[d] already complex trappings of traditional power in a symbolic, indirect, and increasingly hollow assertion of political primacy."[28] Thus, we find the figure of the "hormat-crazy" regent that Minke encounters.

Hormat in its superficial forms mimicked, but did not reproduce, traditional ideas such as the kawula-gusti relationship discussed above. Up and down the ranks of the colonial civil service ran a sense of the necessity of devotion, or at least the display of it toward superiors. This devotion or, more appropriately, sycophancy, was more a manifestation of the dependence one had on a superior, rather than an attempt to achieve harmony within the kingdom or imitate a mystical union with the ultimate reality.[29] This sycophancy became increasingly elaborate and institutionalized during Dutch colonization as a result of the personal dependence on superiors.[30]

The Dutch placed themselves within this hierarchy, often demanding that the same deference be paid to them as one would pay a high-ranking Javanese official. This added to the resentment on the part of Western-educated officials. A Javanese official would often find that he was required to show deference toward those who would, in the absence of racial distinctions, be his social, intellectual, and political inferiors.[31] Although the government in Batavia opposed this and issued a number of circulars to that effect, the local Dutch administrators continued to demand deference.

Before proceeding further, it should be noted that indigenous responses to the Dutch refashioning of the regent were multifarious, even, as was noted above, within the Javanese aristocracy. The priyayi were divided into an old school, seeking to hang on to all the vestiges of power they could, and a group which came to be known as the "new priyayi," who despised the

traditional rulers for their complicity in the Dutch colonial project. The new priyayi attacked the arrogance and feudalism, as they often referred to it, of the traditional rulers. The question of language provides an illuminating example of this schism.

One of the most striking aspects of hormat was the use of a higher language, a form of deference still widespread in modern Java.[32] Javanese consists of two basic language levels. The levels differ from each other in both vocabulary and tone. Ngoko is the lower level. It is the language first learned by Javanese children and the one in which most Javanese think. Krama is considered to be much more refined and is the language of deference. A middle level, madya, is sometimes considered a separate level, but can also be seen as a less refined variant of krama.[33] To show even greater deference than allowed simply through krama, one may choose words from a more limited vocabulary of krama inggil (to indicate an even higher status of the person to or about whom one is speaking) and krama andhap (for elegant self-effacement).[34]

Madya had long been considered to be the krama of the uneducated commoners. One mark of "priyayiness" was the mastery of krama and the ability to control the use of speech levels to fit the situation. As Western education became increasingly available to the priyayi, Dutch emerged as the language of status for the educated. Many children of priyayi families found that the ability to speak Dutch opened many doors for advancement within the civil service. The result of this was an inability to speak krama among many of the younger priyayi.

The threat posed to krama by Dutch became a major concern of the more conservative priyayi. Madya was shunned with greater conviction, and the traditional elite attacked with more fervor the inability of other priyayi to speak krama. For the traditional elite, the ability to speak krama became the primary sign of "priyayiness." The use of madya to them was a sign of poor breeding. It became a rallying point-symbolic of the distance between them and the new elites.[35] Among the younger elites, Dutch was becoming increasingly fashionable, and the ability to speak it brought its own status.[36]

The nationalist movement, along with cries for independence, also solicited objections to the status-laden Javanese language. The creation in 1918 of Djawa Dipo, a group advocating the exclusive use of ngoko for all situations, was a manifestation of this.[37] Earlier, some advocates of krama as the language of all occasions had emerged, but their efforts went largely unnoticed. According to Tjokrosoedarmo, the central figure of the Djawa Dipo movement, ngoko was the language of one's inner thoughts whereas krama was a thing of the unenlightened past.[38] Javanese, however, has survived into the present with all the levels and nuances it had under the Dutch. Perhaps it was the availability of the neutral language of Indonesian which saved it from a harsher attack.[39]

Conclusion

With the recent emphasis on discursive hegemony in the colonial era, the pervasiveness of the influence of the colonizer has been, perhaps, somewhat exaggerated. No hegemony is total, and

despite fundamental alterations at every level of colonized society, the colonized always found discursive spaces in which they contested this hegemony, or in which they could temporarily tend to their own matters which lay beyond the pale of the colonial context. An Indonesian historian, Umar Kayam, has recently published a novel in which he explores the changing identities of a priyayi family as it moves from Dutch rule to political independence.[40] The colonial context in which this family lives clearly has a bearing on how they perceive themselves in the world. However, most of their time is spent attending to more cultural and personal matters that have little to do with that colonial context. This paper, one should bear in mind, is concerned primarily with the outward structural changes of elite indigenous institutions, and in this way is guilty of an overly pronounced emphasis on changes brought about by the colonizer.

Yet, the intrusion in and manipulation of, the role of the bupati by the Dutch points to the presence of a power discourse that must always win. Barred from participation in the official discourse about themselves, the bupati responded through other, even if not particularly noble, means. It was to them that the Dutch pointed in dismay when nationalists called for independence, claiming that the East Indies clearly remained incapable of self-rule. This claim echoed throughout the colonial world: a claim that the nationalists, having found their own discourse, would challenge along with all its contradictions and tautologies.

Notes

1 Pramoedya Ananta Toer, Anak Semua Bangsa (Melaka, Malaysia: Wira Karya, 1982), 107-108.

2 Pramoedya Ananta Toer, This Earth of Mankind, trans.,Max Lane (New York: Avon Books, 1990), 121 - 123.

3 Jan Wisseman Christie, ***Raja and Rama: The Classical State in Early Java,***; Centers, Symbols, and Hierarchies, ed. Lorraine Gesick (New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies Program, 1983), 17-18.

4 Christie, 23.

5 The use of the word ***feudal***; in this context may be legitimately contested. I use it tn the sense that much early Indonesian nationalist writing uses it to designate undesirable aspects of ***traditional***; society.

6 Soemarsaid Moertono, State and Statecraft in Old Java: A Study of the Later Mataram Period, 16th to 19th Century (Ithaca: Modern Indonesia Project, Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 1968), 16.

7 Moertono, 26. The wayang stories are also packed with examples of the total devotion expected

from the subject. During the royal audience scenes in particular one gets the sense of this from the elaborate response elicited by the king's enquiry into the subject's feelings upon receiving his summons.

8 Moertono, 94.

9 Moertono, 94.

10 John Pemberton, On the Subject of 'Java' (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).

11 See in particular, Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prisons, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1979), and ***Truth and Power,***; in Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1927-1977, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980): 108-133.

12 Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, The Politics and Poetics of Transgression (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986).

13 Ann Laura Stoler, Race and the Education of Desire (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995).

14 Sutherland, Making 7.

15 Leslie H. Palmier, ***The Javanese Nobility Under the Dutch,***; Comparative Studies in Society and History, 2, no.1: 210.

16 Palmier, 210-211.

17 Sutherland, Making 8.

18 Palmier, 214.

19 Palmier, 215.

20 Robert Van Neil, Java Under the Cultivation System (Leiden: KITLV Press, 1992), 96.

21 Palmier, 216

22 Palmier, 216.

23 The loss of prestige of the priyayi was also a function of the gradually widening definition of priyayi.

24 Pemberton provides a fascinating example of how the tradition of the ruler's circumambulation of the kingdom was reduced to a brief march down the road to meet the Resident. 61-63.

25 Sutherland, ***The Priyayi,***; 72.

26 Sutherland, ***The Priyayi,***; 73.

27 Sutherland, ***The Priyayi,***; 73.

28 J. Joseph Errington, Language and Social Change in Java (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Monographs in International Studies, Southeast Asia Series, No. 65, 1985), 2.

29 Although it probably would be rather idealistic to propose that this was usually the case in precolonial times.

30 Sutherland, Making 37.

31 Sutherland, Making 37.

32 In fact, high Javanese may be more widely spoken now than ever. See James T. Siegel, Solo in the New Order: Language and Hierarchy in an Indonesian City (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 20.

33 Javanese is frequently said to have three basic levels. For instance see Ward Keeler, Javanese: A Cultural Approach (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Monographs in International Studies, Southeast Asia Series, No. 69, 1984), xviii - xix; and Geertz, 248 - 60. For Madya as a form of krama, see Siegel, 15, 21.

34 Krama inggil, meaning ***high krama***; is often incorrectly defined as simply a more refined level. Keeler explains these different levels quite clearly, xviii - xix.

35 Errington 48-49.

36 Anderson, ***Languages of Indonesian Politics***; 132.

37 Errington 49.

38 Anderson, ***Politics of Language and Javanese Culture***; 216.

39 Anderson, ***Politics of Language and Javanese Culture***; 218.

40 Umar Kayam, Para Priyayi (Jakarta: Grafiti, 1993).